

From Farming to Gaming: How Native Americans Have Been Pushed Into Poverty

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From Farming to Gaming:

How Native Americans Have Been Pushed Into Poverty

[SARAH BOOMGARDEN]

Since the age of discovery, when the first Europeans set foot in North America, the Natives have experienced some of the most extreme forms of marginalization and disenfranchisement. This exploitation includes keeping Native Americans economically vulnerable to the point where they are forced into specific areas of the workforce; before the 1980s they were mostly farmers/ranchers, but after the 1980s, their main industry switched to gambling, or gaming. In this essay, I will argue that Native Americans were forced into the farming/ranching industry by the US government, and that over time gaming became their only economic alternative. In order to explain this situation, I will first analyze laws concerning Native Americans to show how they were systematically marginalized before finally explaining their switch from the industry of farming/ranching to the modern industry of gaming. To support my claims, I will use United States census records from 1920¹ and 1930,² as well as *Native Americans*, edited by Donald A. Grinde Jr.,³ and James I. Schaap's "The Growth of the Native American Gaming Industry: What Has the Past Provided, and What Does the Future Hold?"⁴

The disenfranchisement of Native Americans has been an issue since the first Europeans landed in North America, and arguably has worsened as the centuries have worn on. The negative treatment toward Natives grew more serious in 1830 with the institution of the Indian Removal Act: a law put into place allowing the federal government to displace Native Americans from their traditional tribal lands in order to sell the land off to white Americans.⁵ While there was a caveat that the Natives had to be

1 1920, *Lower Brule Indian Reservation, Stanley, South Dakota*, Roll T625_1724, P 1A, Enumeration District: 195.

2 1930, *Township 109, Stanley, South Dakota*, Page: 1B, Enumeration District: 0050; FHL microfilm: 2341965.

3 *Native Americans*, ed Donald A. Grinde Jr., (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2002).

4 James I. Schaap, "The Growth of the Native American Gaming Industry: What the Past Provided, and What Does the Future Hold?" *American Indian Quarterly* 34 (2010): 365-389.

5 "Indian Removal Act, May 28, 1830," *US Statutes at Large*, 4.411-412, quoted in

provided new land to relocate to, this land was often hundreds of miles away from sacred grounds and were hundreds of times smaller than the open areas they used to roam as nomadic peoples. To make things worse, this new land provided as compensation was also the land the US government wanted the least because it was ill-equipped for farming or traditional Western settlements.

Furthermore, on March 3, 1871, Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act which granted the federal government more power over Native nations, as well as denied them money or services in exchange for lands unless approved by the Department of the Interior.⁶ This eventually led into the General Allotment Act of 1887, which carved up reservation land (once held in common by a tribe) into individual plots to be handed out only to Native Americans who had gone through the process of becoming a US citizen.⁷ Any land that was not claimed by these Native citizens was sold off to white men as “surplus” land without regard to the Natives who still wished to hold land in common for the sake of better chances of survival.⁸ Native American tribes and lifestyles were not equipped to thrive under the European standard of single-person landownership.⁹ The original purpose of this allotment of land was to ensure that Natives who had become US citizens could make a living by working the land and creating an agriculturally-based income for themselves while also forcing them to conform to Western ideals of single landownership.¹⁰ By the 1920s, under the Citizenship Act of 1924, many Native Americans who had become citizens through treaties or other means had their citizenship nullified, leaving their tribally-allotted land free to be purchased from under them by white Americans.¹¹

Under US law, any Native American not using their land properly could have their citizenship revoked and any property taken from them. The proper use of land in the eyes of the federal and local governments typically meant that the land provided was used for agricultural production. Thus, Native Americans were forced to work in the agricultural industry.

Native Americans, ed Donald A. Grinde Jr., (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2002), 215-216.

6 Donald A. Grinde, Jr., “Native Americans and Civil Rights,” in *ibid.*, 60.

7 *Ibid.*, 61.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Single-person landownership here can be defined as the idea that one person or one family owns a single plot of land and has record of that via a deed or purchase receipt. Furthermore, this person or family can acquire more land for themselves or sell off the land they own if they so choose. This is in direct opposition with how Native tribes once lived. There was one massive chunk of land that was often hundreds of square miles and no one owned it. The whole tribe used the land and may have regarded it as their territory if they came in contact with another tribe, but the land was owned by no individual, no family, or even by the tribe itself.

10 Grinde, “Native Americans,” 63.

11 *Ibid.*

There was no other option provided for them. There was no longer the space for them to reside as nomadic peoples as they had before European settlement, and any occupation other than agriculture could result in the removal of their citizenship. Under this ideology, revoked citizenship meant they were entitled to no rights as an American, and without land ownership, not even tribal laws could truly protect them. They would be homeless and landless in the most devastating way possible.

Through the United States Census of 1920, I studied the Lower Brule Indian Reservation of South Dakota. On this reservation, like many other reservations across the US, the majority of the people living there were employed as farmers or ranchers.¹² One man in particular, a 44-year-old Native American father of three, William Forked Butte, is listed as employed on a “stock ranch,” or livestock ranch.¹³ Ten years later in 1930, Butte is listed as being employed on a “general farm.”¹⁴ The name of the occupation may be different because of how the census taker chose to record it, or Butte may have changed occupations from ranching to farming. Either way, he continued his life working in the agricultural sector. Furthermore, chances are that his sons, John and Finton, and their children, would have also worked in the agricultural field because it was the only option available to them.¹⁵ Butte and his family are only one example of one native family out of thousands of others who continued this employment pattern out of legal necessity, not choice. However, this pattern began to break in the 1980s.

In the 1980s, casinos and other forms of gaming became a marketable industry that helped boost the economies of reservations. In the 1960s, Nevada was the only state to allow casinos.¹⁶ There was a great deal of economic potential in opening a casino in any other part of the country; however, Native Americans were the only people with the ability to build them because they lived outside of state regulation and had their own sovereign governments. In 1987, the Supreme Court upheld the right of Native tribes to have casinos and other gambling facilities on reservations without the intervention of state governments.¹⁷ This was especially helpful in creating jobs for Native Americans as well as bringing in revenue to impoverished reservations. This was important because of the strict laws many states, especially in the midwestern United States, put in place to regulate gaming. In South Dakota, where Butte lived in the 1920s with his family, gambling or owning an establishment that allowed gambling is still a class two misdemeanor today.¹⁸ Furthermore, the state of Illinois

12 1920, *Lower Brule Indian Reservation*.

13 *Ibid.*

14 1930, *Township 109*.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Schaap, 365.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Chuck Humphrey, “South Dakota Gambling Laws,” *Gambling-Law-US.com*, last

makes casino ownership and patronage especially difficult—all gambling has to be done on a boat, with a license, in any water that is within the boundaries of Illinois and is not on Lake Michigan.¹⁹ For these reasons, it was especially beneficial for reservations to have a legal monopoly on gambling on solid ground within their state lines.

The gaming industry has been called “the new buffalo” due to its ability to bring \$12.8 billion in revenue to destitute reservations across the US by 2001 estimates.²⁰ With this increase in revenue, 636,000 jobs were created for Native Americans by 2008.²¹ Despite this creation of new jobs and an alternative to farming/ranching, jobs in the gaming industry are still low-wage jobs. Native American casinos are more likely to be placed in economically destitute areas; therefore, the average pay for the newly created jobs are lower than they were prior to the arrival of the casino.²² Native Americans are being pushed into jobs in the gaming industry because it is the only somewhat successful alternative to farming that gives them the potential to break out of poverty. Despite the increased opportunity and prosperity of tribes as a whole, the individuals still suffer.

Native Americans have always been and continue to be the poorest and most disparaged minority group in the United States, regardless of the increased economic activity created by the gaming industry. Native peoples are three times more likely to live below the poverty line than any other group in the United States.²³ Additionally, they are more likely to be homeless than any other group in the US, and many of those who do have homes lack basic everyday amenities, like indoor plumbing, we outside the reservations take for granted.²⁴ Yet, the most horrifying reality of all is that Native children as young as five years old are considered at high risk for committing suicide.²⁵

The argument can be made that if gaming revenue is increasing across tribal governments, then those who work in the gaming industry should have increased wages to support a better standard of living. However, this is not possible because of the basic rules of capitalism. In order to keep tribal income high and increase tribal social services and programs to help its members, wages for the working class must be kept low. If worker wages were increased, the tribe would lose money, making

modified December 1, 2016, <http://www.gambling-law-us.com/State-Laws/South-Dakota/>.

19 Illinois General Assembly, “Gaming: (230 ILCS 10/) Riverboat Gambling Act,” <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs3.asp?ActID=1399&ChapAct=230%2%A0ILCS%2%A010/&ChapterID=25&ChapterName=GAMING&ActName=Riverboat%2BGambling%2BAct>.

20 Schaap, 365.

21 Ibid, 369.

22 Ibid, 374.

23 Ibid, 373.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

social services unavailable. Whether employees have an increase in wages or not, either the tribe as a whole and individuals suffer, or the tribe as a whole prospers and individuals suffer. Because of the massive gap in equality between Natives and other American groups, what is considered prosperous for a tribe could be considered scraping by for any other group. The US government needs to take responsibility for its marginalization of its nation's first people and give them adequate resources to help themselves.

Native Americans have been pushed into both the agricultural industry as well as the gaming industry by circumstances created by the United States government. While it is difficult to attempt to make amends with centuries of ill treatment and bad blood, the reality is that if something does not change, the future of Native Americans across the country, as well as the future of the United States, will remain bleak. Native Americans are the foundation of American culture and are at the heart of US history and identity. If the government continues to ignore their despair and cries for help, while continuing to push them into dead-end low-wage industries, what is left of one of the greatest aspects of our country will eventually dwindle and cease to exist.